Conall Gulban

(d. 464)

BRIEFING

Conall Gulban (died c. 464) was an Irish king and eponymous ancestor of the Cenél Conaill, who founded the kingdom of Tír Chonaill in the 5th century, comprising much of what is now County Donegal in Ulster. He was the son of Niall Noígiallach.

BIOGRAPHY

His by-name Gulban derives from Benn Ghulbain in the north of modern-day County Sligo, from which centre the sons of Niall set out upon their conquest of the North. King Conall Gulban was murdered by the Masraige at Magh Slécht in Tullyhaw in what later became Bréifne (Tullyhaw is now a barony in the west of modern-day County Cavan) in 464, on a Friday. He was buried by Saint Caillín at Fenagh in the south of modern-day County Leitrim. He is important in the history of Irish Christianity as he was the first nobleman baptised by Saint Patrick, thus opening the way for the conversion of the ruling classes of Ireland.

He appears as a host and companion of Caílte mac Rónáin, one of the central Fianna figures in the tale Acallam na Senórach (Colloquy of the Ancients) who survive into Christian times and recounts tales of the Fianna and the meaning of place names to a recently arrived Saint Patrick. Caílte performs the same function to Conall in Tír Conaill and uncovers the treasures of the Fianna from the various megalithic tombs of its members on their journeys.

He was apparently very close to his brother Eógan mac Néill who died of grief over his brother's death the next year.

His sons included Fergus Cendfota, Dauí (founder of the Cenél nDuach) and Énna Bogaine (founder of the Cenél mBogaine).

DESCENDANTS

His descendants were known as the Cenél Conaill. Their territory Tir Conaill was organised as the Diocese of Raphoe in 1111 at the Synod of Ráth Breasail. It did not at that time include the Inishowen peninsula.

The peninsula of Inishowen in the north of County Donegal was taken from the McLoughlins by the Cenél Conaill Ó Dochartaigh clan (known modernly as Doherty, Daugherty, Docherty, Dougherty, etc.) who were then given the title of Princes of Donegal, or Tir Conaill. This family also descends from Conall.

The Cenél nEógain, descended from his brother Eoghan, became the other premier Uí Néill sept in the North. Their kingdom was known as Tír Eógain. Modern day County Tyrone shares both its name and much of its territory. Its respective royal dynasties, the Kings of Tir Connaill and the Kings of Tír Eógain. Its last de jure native rulers fled abroad in the episode known as the Flight of the Earls but, as with all the major Irish kingships, the line of descent continues into the present day.